DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 335 607 CG 023 600

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TITLE Achievement in the Brazilian Public Schools: Research for Counseling Intervention.
PUB DATE Aug 91
NOTE 21p.; Paper presented at the Annual Convention of the American Psychological Association (99th, San Francisco, CA, August 16-20, 1991).
PUB TYPE Reports - Research/Technical (143) -- Speeches/Conference Papers (150)

EDRS PRICE MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS Academic Achievement; *Academic Failure; *Attribution Theory; Elementary Education; *Elementary School Students; *Elementary School Teachers; Foreign Countries; Low Income Groups; Motivation; *Public Schools; School Counseling; Self Esteem; *Teacher Expectations of Students
IDENTIFIERS *Brazil

ABSTRACT

School failure in elementary school students from low income families has been a serious problem in Brazilian public schools for many years. A number of studies were implemented in an effort to reduce the incidence of school failure. One set of studies focusing on teachers' causal perceptions revealed a combination of socio-economic determinism and psychological fatalism. The teachers (three samples consisting of 451 elementary school teachers, 28 elementary school teachers, and 907 preschool teachers) believed that children failed mainly because of their families' poverty which did not promote successful learning conditions. It was then hypothesized that the experience of failure is the independent variable that, along with teachers' low expectations and negative attributions, produce lowered achievement motivation and self-esteem and negative school attitudes. Research with students (N=180) and their teachers supported the hypothesis. From first grade on, teachers had higher expectations and estimates of intellectual potential for the students who eventually succeeded. By the fifth grade, unsuccessful students had more negative attitudes toward schooling, lower self-concepts, and emitted mostly internal, stable and uncontrollable failure attributions while successful students were mostly internal, stable and controllable to success. Interventions have focused on changes in the teacher training curriculum and support of in-service teacher education. Counseling interventions must also be conducted with children who are failing. (Author/NB)

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Achievement in the Brazilian Public Schools: Research for Counseling Intervention

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Paper presented at the 1991 Annual Convention of the American Psychological Association. San Francisco, California, August 16-20, 1991.

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Achievement in the Brazilian Public Schools:

Research for Counseling Intervention

Abstract

School failure in elementary level students from low income families has been a serious problem in Brazilian public schools for many years. With the purpose to contribute to the reduction of school failure, a number of studies were implemented. The first set focused on teachers' causal perceptions. They revealed a combination of socio-economic determinism and psychological fatalism. They believed children failed mainly because of their families' poverty which did not promote successful learning conditions. It was then hypothesized that the experience of failure is, rather, the independent variable that, along with teachers' low expectancy and negative attributions, produce lowered achievement motivation and self-esteem and negative school attitudes. Research with students and their teachers support the hypothesis. From first grade on, teachers had higher expectations and estimates of intellectual potential for the students who eventually succeeded. By the 5th grade, unsuccessful students had more negative attitudes towards schooling, lower self-concepts and emitted mostly internal, stable and uncontrollable failure attributions while success students were mostly internal, stable and controllable to success. Interventions have focused on: (1) changes in the teacher training curriculum (2) support of in-service teacher education. Counseling interventions must also be conducted with children who are failing aiming at reattribution training and attitudinal change.

Achievement in the Brazilian Public Schools: Research for Counseling Intervention

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In the past two decades, educational opportunities have been extended to a large proportion of the Brazilian population and enrollment in elementary school has grown considerably. Despite that, school failure, represented by drop-out and retention in the grade, has persisted and a very large percentage of children leave school before they even complete four years of schooling.

As expected, this problem occurs almost exclusively in the public school system and affects mostly children from low socio-economic levels (Brandão, Baeta e Rocha, 1983). The highest rates are in the passage from first to second grade (reaching about 50%) but for those who succeed to stay at school beyond the first grade, the probability of finishing the eighth grade is still low. For every 1000 children who started school in 1971, only 349 (35%) got to the 4th grade and 180 (18%) to the 8th grade. It was estimated that among the 7 million children enrolled in grade one in 1978, only 1.4 million (20%) finished 8th grade in 1985 (SEEC/MEC, 1981).

Actually, these statistics were a bit optimistic, at least for the state where our research was conducted. In the 1978-1985 cohort, only 13 percent of the children who enrolled in 1978 finished the 8th. grade in 1985 (Gama, Salviato e Jesus, 1985).

Our studies also showed that, the lower the socio-economic

conditions of the region, the lower the rate of access to school and the worse the overall school performance (rate of promotion and drop-out); the poorer the student, the lower his/her performance and the higher the probability of failure (Gama, Jesus, Doxsey, Carvalho, Lucas, Salviato & Gonçalves, 1984).

With the long range goal to contribute to the reduction of failure in the grade and drop out in the public school system, I and my colleagues set up a broad program of investigation. It involved a number of research studies developed by faculty and graduate students, that I will attempt to summarize below.

First, the search for causal explanation in the literature led to three theoretical approaches:

1). The critical-reproductivist theories that place the causality of educational problems in the socio-economic system. The role of education is to reproduce the social structure and to maintain the status quo. It is a deterministic approach to education meaning that children from low income families are doomed to fail even before they try to succeed. Some of the most known representatives of this line of thinking are Bowles & Gintis (1976) in the United States and Bourdieu & Passeron (1975) in Europe.

2) The theories of cultural deprivation (or the psychological deficit). Even though lacking the organized framework of a theory, the body of research developed in the United States previous to the implementation of compensatory education programs, clearly revealed a metatheoretical framework with the assumption that poverty means not only less money but also less psychological readiness for

learning and achieving. Thus research in the psychology of poverty, (with standards of performance derived from middle class norms) led to various conclusions about children from low income families, such as language deficiencies, and inadequate language basis for thinking (Houston, 1970), lower motivation to achieve, level of aspiration, self-concept and attitudes towards schooling generally incompatible with achievement (Bernstein, 1960; Gordon, 1965; Patto, 1985), etc.

c) The critical theories: They are based on the assumption that even though the educational phenomena can only be understood through its social determinants, the schooling experience serves as a mediator between the concrete conditions of origin of the students and their social destiny. The contradictory relationship between reproduction and transformation are made concrete in the school, by the school. The quality of the schooling experience will determine if this mediation will be towards reproduction or negation of the conditions of origin. (Mello, 1980).

While the first set of theories blames the system, the second set blames the child for her/his school performance. The critical theories are the only ones that recognize that the educational process does have some autonomy from the social class origins of the student. This is obviously, the approach we subscribe to. To assume that the conditions of living of the student produce psychological and emotional characteristic that are inappropriate for adequate learning and that promote failure, means the acceptance of economic determinism mixed with psychological

reductionism where the individual and the educational systems are powerless pawns on the hands of social destiny.

Our search for empirical causal explanations for the phenomena of school failure in the public schools, focused on two populations: elementary school teachers and students. I will attempt to report those studies as synthetically as possible. To make the report more understandable, objectives, method and results will be presented for each group, separately.

Research with Teachers

The investigation with teachers had the following purpose:

. To identify teacher's attributions for school success and failure among public school students.

. To identify teacher expectations of success for their students and to assess its relationship to the students' actual performance.

Summary of the Design

There were three different samples:

Sample 1. consisted of 451 elementary school teachers from grades 1 through 4. They worked in six different counties, one from each of the six regions of the state. About half of them worked in the rural area and half worked with one classroom schools. Data was collected in the region were they worked. Data collection procedures involved two parts:

Part one was qualitative. After been presented statistics showing the performance of their county in terms of school failure, they participated on a discussion about the determinants of school

failure and drop out in their schools. Their opinions were recorded and later content analyzed. The various categories of determinants emerged from the data itself. This study is reported in Gama, Lucas, Salviato, Jesus, Carvalho and Doxsey (1985).

Part two was quantitative. They were presented two lists with 16 items each related to possible determinants of school failure and success. These included: school conditions, technical-methodological conditions, teacher-student relationship, student characteristics, family characteristics. They were asked to choose up to five of the most important causes of failure and of success. This study, as well as the study with samples two and three below, are reported in Gama & Jesus (1985, in press).

Sample two consisted of 28 teachers from the two public schools chosen to participate on the studies to be reported with students. They worked in grades 1, 3 and 5 and responded to the same attribution questionnaire described above. Also, they rated their individual students according to three dimensions: their intellectual potential, their expectancy of schooling, and estimated performance in the end of the school year.

Sample three consisted of 907 pre-school teachers (99.2% of the public pre-school teacher population). They responded to the same attribution questionnaire described above.

Results

Qualitative study with sample one:

The information collected from the discussion with the teachers revealed a large amount of similarity between the six

different sub-samples. Five categories of determinants were identified, each one with several different but related themes. These categories were: philosophical and political assumptions that underlie the practice of education, economic factors, socio-psychological factors, intra-school factors and extra-school factors related to the educational support.

In all the six counties, teachers attributed higher emphasis to the socio-psychological factors regarding the student (lack of motivation and effort, apathy, lack of readiness to learn, etc) and the economic factors related to the conditions of poverty of the family, as the most important determinants of school failure.

Quantitative studies:

Statistical analysis revealed similar results among the three groups of teachers in terms of their attributions of school success or failure. In both cases they exempted themselves from any share of responsibility for school failure and blamed the children and their families. On the other hand, they did see their skills as two of the main causes of student success. Overall, these were the most common causes of school success:

. The family's interest in the child's school work;

. The teachers' good teaching skills;

. The students' effort

. The teachers' good relationship skills.

The most commonly chosen causes of failure were:

. The poor socio-economic conditions of the family;

. The family's lack of interest in the students' school work;

. The students' lack of personal effort.

The three measures of teacher expectancy were analyzed by grade and according to the students actual performance in the end of the school year.

Analysis of variance by grade and by student performance level revealed that teachers' estimates of the students' intellectual potential, teachers' expectancy of schooling for the students and teachers' expectancy of student performance in the end of the academic year were significantly higher for those students who did end up succeeding (Jesus and Gama, in press).

Research with Students

Our research with the teachers indicated that they perceived failure as being the dependent variable in the school achievement causal chain in which the child's socio-economic class and related socio-psychological conditions were the independent variable. But based on the assumptions of the critical theories one can argument that these children bring to school the best that their concrete living condition allows them to have. In this case, the educational experience, at the service of the dominating classes, promotes social selectivity through the experience of school failure, convincing the children that they are inferior and incompetent and thus leading to future failure experiences and school drop out. Under this perspective, the initial experiences of school failure would be the independent variable.

Previous studies showed a significant relationship between causal attribution, learned helplessness, self-concept and

achievement. Children with a history of failure had lower self-concept, higher incidence of learned helplessness and higher tendency to internalize their failures (Nunes, 1988; Taliuli, 1982). However, none of these studies had first graders in their sample. Having worked mostly with fourth and fifth graders they were assessing a completely different population due to the high levels of drop-out in the two early grades. Also, they were all correlational and could not answer our questions regarding the directionality of the achievement causal chain.

The answer to such question has serious implications for school counselors and their work. If the causality of school failure among low income children in elementary school is located in an inadequate psychological profile and inadequate motivation, the work of the counselor is remedial and directed at the student population. Compensatory education would be a constant necessity. If, on the contrary, the schooling experience and specifically, the experience of failure in an environment that values success achievement and competition, is so traumatic as to affect the development of psychological characteristics related to future underachievement, the counseling intervention has to focus on the totality of the schooling experience with the purpose to make long term qualitative changes, create more adequate learning experiences and increase the probability of success.

Summary of the Study

A total of 180 children were randomly selected, 60 in the first, 60 in the third and 60 in the fifth grade. Third and 5th.

graders were selected among two previously stratified groups according to their history of school success or failure. First graders were classified only at the end of the school year and after their selection.

To answer the question of directionality, the quasi-longitudinal design was chosen for the measure of causal attribution and attitudes towards schooling. In these cases, first graders were pre and post-tested and 3rd. and 5th graders were post-tested only. In all other cases, all subjects were tested in the end of the academic year only, after been evaluated by their teachers.

The following variables were investigated:

. Causal attribution of success and failure;

. Attitudes towards school;

. Expectancy of success in intellectual tasks;

. Self-Concept (3rd. and 5th graders only).

The control variables were: socio-economic status (all students come from very poor families) and IQ. A complete description of the study and results is reported in Jesus & Gama (1989).

Results

As one would expected this investigation yielded a large amount of data. In this presentation we will only report the main results and conclusions by set of variables.

. There were no differences between success and failure students in terms of IQ and expectancy of success in intellectual tests.

. **Causal attribution patterns.** Results were analyzed by causal dimension, as follows:

a) Causal locus. Up to the 3rd. grade, there were no differences between the two groups in their attributions to success situations, which were mostly internal. In the 5th. grade, success students still internalize the causality of their success while failure students come to attribute it to external factors. There were no differences for failure attributions, which were mostly internal.

b) Causal stability. In the attributions to success situations, there were no differences in any of the grades and they were predominantly stable. In failure situations, there were no differences till the third grade when most attributions were unstable. In the 5th grade, a significantly higher number of failure students believe their failure is due to stable factors while success students predominantly assign unstable causality to their failure experiences.

c) Causal controllability. In attributions to failure situations, there were no differences. Most attributions were classified as uncontrollable. In success situations, most students start school believing they are due to uncontrollable causes. In the 3rd. grade one can begin seeing changes in the data, though not significantly. By the 5th grade, there is a significant difference and the majority of failure students attribute their success experiences to uncontrollable factors while success students believe that their success is due to controllable factors.

Attitudes towards School. The attitude scale was divided in three sub-scales: attitudes towards schooling and education, attitudes towards school activities and attitudes towards teachers and administrative staff. Results and comparisons of 1st. grade scores were very interesting. In terms of their general attitudes towards schooling and education there were no differences among success and failure students in the pre nor the post-test scores, nor there were any changes from pre to post-test scores. Significant changes were observed only in the two other sub-scales, which are much more related to the students' daily experience. In the beginning of the school year, first graders who ended up succeeding had a more positive attitude towards school activities, teachers and personnel than those who ended up failing. But curiously, the scores of the success students in those same scales decreased significantly from pre to post-test, a change that did not occur with failure students, so that, at the end of the year, there was no difference between the two groups. This pattern could suggest that, despite their more positive attitudes towards schooling and education and despite their good performance, success students become disappointed with their actual experience at school as the year goes along, so that, at the end both groups have similar attitudes which also were less positive. In the case of 3rd and 5th. graders, however, the experience of failure seems more impactful. Regardless of grade level, success student have significantly more positive attitudes in all the sub-scales considered.

Self-concept. Regardless of grade level, there were significant differences between the two groups. Success students had higher self concept scores.

Conclusions

Analyzed globally, the results of our investigation, so far, seem to be supporting the hypothesis proposed by the critical theories. Research with teachers led to the following conclusions:

. Teachers' attributions reveal a mix of beliefs on socio-economic determinism and social-psychological deficit as major determinants of elementary school failure.

. Their causal perceptions are strong and stable across samples, locations and periods of data collection.

. Whether revealed quantitatively or qualitatively, the configuration of their causal perceptions suggest a feeling of powerlessness, inability to make changes and pedagogical passivity. Right from first grade, their expectancy of success and their estimates of intellectual potential for the students who end up failing are systematically lower than their expectations for success students (even though there was no difference between those two groups in terms of IQ and expectancy of success in intellectual tasks). Still, and despite their poor training and the poverty conditions of the schools, teachers exempt themselves and the schools from any responsibility and blame the students and their families for their failure. In that sense their causal perceptions plus their expectancies very likely start up the self fulfilling prophecy causal chain and the teachers become the instruments of

social selectivity in the schools. The feeling of powerlessness that comes across in their discourse is most impressive. As we have concluded:

> To the degree that education is perceived as something that is constructed and implemented outside their level of influence, decision and competence, the subjects' discourse and representations suggest a sense of subservience, passiveness and incapacity to generate the needed changes in the schools (Gama, Lucas, Salviato, Jesus, Carvalho & Doxsey, in press).

In terms of causal attribution patterns, our results clearly show that the experience of success and failure in elementary school does make a differential impact in the students. The cross-sectional analysis suggests that this impact builds up slowly, from grade to grade, to the point that by the fifth grade students with a history of success learn to believe that their success is due to causes that are internal, stable and controllable --- which means continued motivation to achieve, self-confidence, higher future expectation and hope of other successes. However, those students with a history of failure come to believe that their lack of success is due to causes that are internal, stable and uncontrollable --- meaning reduction of expectations of future success, lowered self-esteem and feelings of shame and powerlessness.

The schooling experience and specifically, the experience of success or failure, also seem to have a significant impact on the students attitudes towards schooling and their self-concept, so that by the third grade already, those students who are succeeding feel better about themselves and more positive about education,

their school activities and their teachers. Failure students, on the other hand, do not even manage to maintain their positive general attitudes about education. Analyzed in conjunction with the data obtained from their teachers (sample two) one cannot ignore observing the logical relationship between their teachers' causal perceptions of failure and their expectations of success for those students and the students' lowered self-concept and attitudes.

Counseling Interventions

The empirical demonstration and discussion of the serious educational problems of our State, reported in Gama et al (1984), was followed by awareness and honest concern by the faculty of the College of Education and led to the development of many subsequent studies attempting to understand the phenomena. The studies I and my colleagues conducted focused on psycho-educational issues. Other studies, conducted by other faculty members, have focused on other related issues.

Results from the various investigations reported here as well as other related studies (e.g. Castro, Jesus, Schneider & Ferreira, 1986; Gama, Capezzutto & Monjardim, 1987) were object of seminars and discussions with the faculty of the College of Education of the Federal University of Espírito Santo and with the technical staff of the State Department of Education that administers that public school system. It is our understanding that the dimensions and the nature of the problem require broad and deep changes in the educational system. We do not have the human nor the financial

resources to work with individual students. Besides, preventive measures, will have much more long lasting effectiveness.

Overall, there seems to be a genuine concern with the problem, in the State, and both the University and the State Department of Education have been working towards the reduction of failure and drop out in the system. At the university level, intervention has focused on:

. Evaluation of the teacher training program, an activity which involved students, graduates and faculty of the College of Education.

. Changes in the teacher training curriculum involving: a stronger emphasis on the foundations of education as well as the inclusion of new subjects in linguistics and education and special education; a specific curriculum for elementary teacher training; an extension of the length of the teacher training program; the training of Guidance Counselors and School Supervisors in the specialist level (previously undergraduate) and a specialist program in Special Education.

At the state level many seminars have been conducted with the administrative staff, technical personnel and faculty of the public school system. Sometimes with College of Education faculty members, other times with their own staff, in-service activities have been conducted. Those activities are aimed at better qualifying teachers to work with students from low income families.

It is also recommended that, in the public schools, seminars should be conducted with guidance counselors. Besides becoming

aware of the literature and data regarding our education they should be trained in specific counseling interventions to be conducted with children who are failing aimed at reattribution training, attitudinal change and increasing self-esteem.

As we see it, the content of psychological processes and functions is historically and culturally situated and constructed according to the conditions of living that society has allowed us to have. Research in counseling and education has the purpose to understand the complexity of the educational phenomena in each and all cultural groups (including social class) in order to contribute to changes towards growth and better living conditions. Due to the precarious conditions of education in the lower socio-economic classes in Brazil, we chose to work with them. We know that changes, in cases such as those as slow to come, because they imply changing the ways many in the educational community think. It also implies changing the ways the political community think and the way the general public think. We are not in a hurry but we are committed to our work. Maybe my students, or the students of my students will see permanent changes. I hope so.

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